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ABSTRACT

Words, like any other information resource, must be managed in order to contribute to the achievement of organizational goals. Managing communication refers to planning, organizing, leading, and controlling words. Planning determines goals and how they can be best accomplished, and aids in providing direction for the message, thus increasing the chances that the message will achieve its purpose. Once the "what" and "how" have been identified, the organizing function puts the plan into action. Gathering any previous related conversations or correspondence on the topic, and determining how the message will be transmitted will make writing the message easier. Managing the message entails speaking or writing in a way that will make the receivers respond in accordance with the purpose of the message. This requires awareness of the environmental factors that affect people's responses, including timing, the receiver's emotional state, and images that evoke positive responses. Finally, controlling is comparing what was planned with what actually occurred, based on feedback, and making necessary adjustments. (HTH)

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MANAGE YOUR WORDS

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ABSTRACT

Words, like any other information resource, must be managed in order to contribute to the achievement of organizational goals. When we speak of managing communication, we are talking about planning, organizing, leading, and controlling as they apply to managing words.

INTRODUCTION

Words, like any other information resource, must be managed in order to contribute to the achievement of organizational goals. The functional approach to management is often only accidentally and peripherally applied to management of an organization's communications. Applications of the fundamental principles of management is basic to using the organizational communication network effectively and efficiently.

The functional approach to management identifies four primary managerial functions which differentiate managers from nonmanagers. Managers plan, organize, lead, and control. So, when we speak of managing communication, we are talking about planning, organizing, leading, and controlling as they apply to managing words. Figure 1 illustrates these relationships.

PLANNING

Planning answers the questions "What do I want to accomplish?" and "How can it best be accomplished?" Planning aids in providing direction for the message, increases the chances that the purpose of the message will be accomplished, and makes the communication, whether written or oral, easier. Let's look at each of the planning questions and apply each to a situation. "What do I want to accomplish?" I want to communicate to the vice president that I have an idea that will increase sales, and I want her to know that the idea is mine. I also want to get a reaction from her. That's the WHAT. How shall I communicate this idea? Shall I do it by memo, by letter, by telephone, by making an appointment and through

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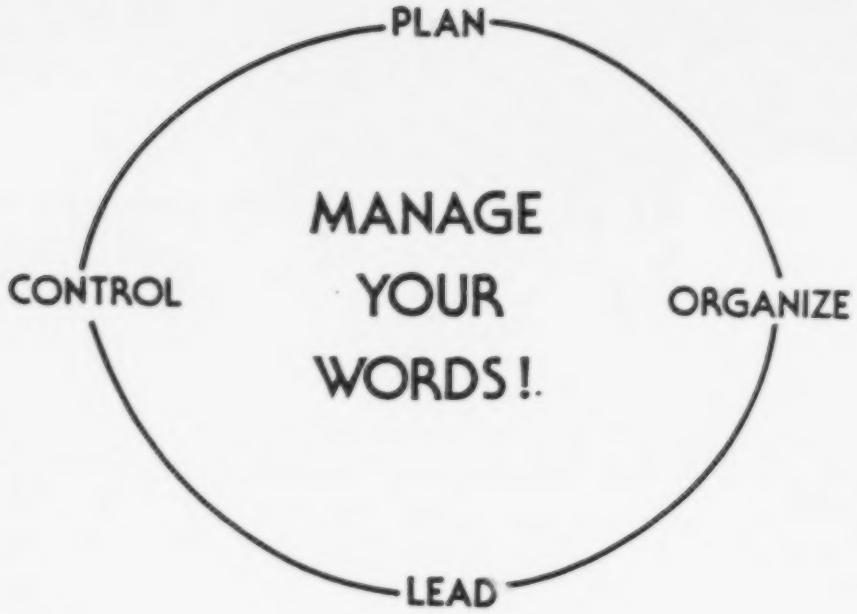

Figure 1. Managing Your Words

face-to-face conversation? How is the best method for communicating the information so that my objectives will most likely be achieved?

Or, I want to communicate to the people who work for me that I am not pleased about the latest productivity report, and I want to ask them for their input in identifying the reason for the productivity lag. That's the WHAT. HOW can I communicate this information to the workers and achieve the second part of the WHAT--to get their input? Shall I write a memo, call a meeting of all workers, identify certain leaders within the group and talk with them individually? HOW can I communicate the message and achieve results?

In a previous position I held, I asked our secretary via a scribbled note to mail certificates of completion to students who had just finished a six-week course. I wanted these certificates to reach the students in a condition suitable for framing. My note said, "Melody, fold these certificates as little as possible." She did. She folded them so they fit nicely into an envelope--one of the small personal-size envelopes. Of course, what I meant was, please don't fold these more than absolutely necessary, but what Melody read was to make these as little as possible. Obviously I should have chosen another vehicle for transmitting my message. Had I chosen face-to-face communication, I could have gotten feedback and verification that Melody understood my intent regarding the certificates.

It is important that as a part of the planning function we give consideration to WHAT and HOW and that we not assume that we are just "doing what comes naturally."

ORGANIZING

Once we have identified the WHAT and HOW, we need to put these plans into action. That's what the organizing function does--it puts plans into action. How often have we sat down, grabbed a pen and a legal pad, and started to write without a clear idea of what we want to write? How many times do we pick up the telephone and begin the conversation without a clear idea of what we are going to say in order to accomplish our objectives in making the telephone call? Perhaps that kind of organizing is acceptable for routine, easy messages, but it is not a good approach for nonroutine or complicated messages. Routine messages should be composed quickly, relying on good writing/speaking skills to produce effective messages the first time. Nonroutine messages are the ones which you don't feel completely comfortable with and expect to spend some time on, and which are too important or too difficult to compose in five minutes on a first draft. No one should expect to write nonroutine messages both quickly and effectively. The question is how to spend the extra time on a message most effectively.

The first thing you must do before you can prepare to communicate any message is your homework. If there has been previous correspondence or previous conversation, find out what the correspondence or the conversation conveyed. Annotate, make notes, or outline your response, depending on the complexity of the message.

Decide the way in which you will transmit your written message. Will you dictate the letter? To a secretary? To a machine? Write it on a legal pad? Dictate to a word-processing center? Send the message electronically? What is the most efficient way to transmit the written message?

LEADING

A manager performs the leading function. This function is one in which the manager creates an environment that encourages people to act in a desired way to achieve the goals of the organization. When we manage our words, we need to speak or write in a way that will get the people to respond in the way we want them to respond.

In order to accomplish this goal, we should be aware of factors in the environment that affect the way in which someone responds. Reception is affected by our timing, by being alert to the emotional state of the receiver, by using images that

invoke a positive response, and by being clear about what we wish to communicate so that the receiver is clear about our message intent.

Poor timing often results in an unfavorable reaction. If we pick a time that is inappropriate to make a request, we may get what we consider to be an inappropriate response. For example, my department chairman is working on the teaching schedule for next fall that is due in half an hour, has just finished the first draft, and is in the middle of trying to coordinate available rooms, faculty, and required courses. I choose this time to discuss changing the text for a course I teach. I knock, stick my head in the door. What do you think his response will be? How was my timing? I somehow doubt that his response is going to be positive.

We should be alert to the emotional state of the receiver. If, a half hour ago, you had a major disagreement with your secretary, and now you need a rush top priority report completed even if it means working late, do you think she's going to be in responsive emotional state? The way you approach this request is going to determine her response.

Images that invoke positive responses should be used. The picture we paint with the words we choose will affect the response we receive. Try to avoid negatively charged words and expressions where possible. Expressions like gives directions or provides instructions are perceived differently from ones like issues orders--one more positive and one more negative image, but the intent is the same. Depersonalize by saying "the problem" rather than "your problem" or by saying "a difficulty" instead of "the difficulty you are having." This behavior tends to make the message less personal and less emotionally charged. The response you receive then tends to be less defensive.

We also need to be sure that we are clear about what we wish to communicate and that the recipient is clear about what we have communicated. There is a saying, "I know you believe you understand what you think I have said but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." The example I used earlier about asking my secretary to fold the certificates "as little as possible" illustrates what can result from lack of clarity.

Employee productivity can be improved by having open lines of communication that remove roadblocks causing frustration and causing inefficiency. Open communication techniques used in an atmosphere in which employees interact with superiors and subordinates are conducive to improved performance. When workers do not understand how to perform a task and yet feel free to ask for assistance, their performance improves.

CONTROLLING

And, finally, a manager performs the controlling function. Controlling is comparing what was planned with what actually occurred and taking corrective action when necessary. The information on which we base our actions is provided by feedback. Without feedback we have no way of knowing with any kind of certainty that our message was received and correctly interpreted. On the basis of feedback we receive, we take the appropriate action. If the feedback reinforces our illusion that the message was received and understood, no additional action is necessary. If the feedback does not reinforce, then we may need to provide the receiver with additional message reinforcement.

CONCLUSION

I believe that in our daily routine of communicating with others, we do try to approach the task in an efficient manner. However, I am not sure that we consciously complete the tasks through the functional approach to management by managing our words in the same conscious, deliberate, and purposeful way that the functional approach suggests. Do we <u>really</u> start the communication process by mentally identifying what it is we wish to accomplish, or do we just start? Do we consciously think about the alternative ways of transmitting messages, or do we just grab a pen and start to write without considering that a telephone call might be a more effective way? If we follow the functional approach to managing words, then we <u>plan</u> the WHAT and HOW.

After identifying what we want to accomplish and ascertaining the best way, do we have a clear idea of how to put those plans into action? Using the functional approach, we do, as we organize our plans and put them into action.

Do we create an environment, through use of words, to get people to take desired action in order to accomplish an objective? If we use the functional approach, we do, as we are aware of factors in the environment that affect the way in which people respond.

And finally, do we use feedback to compare what was planned with what actually occurred and to give us a basis for corrective action? If we use the functional approach, we do. Let's try it. Let's try to apply the plan, organize, lead, and control functions to managing our words. Perhaps the recipients of the message won't be yelling "WHERE'S THE MESSAGE?"